

NEWS FROM THE MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

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Contact: Bonnie Barnard, Communicable Disease Surveillance, DPHHS, 406-444-0273
Jon Ebelt, Public Information Officer, DPHHS, 406-444-0936

Pertussis Cases on the Rise in Montana

The total number of statewide pertussis cases has climbed to 26, state health officials said Friday, March 14, 2008.

That figure compares to just eight cases reported at this same time in 2007.

This year's fast start does concern Bonnie Barnard of the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) because she knows all too well how quickly pertussis, or whooping cough, can spread if the proper precautions aren't taken.

The bacteria has specifically shown up in western Montana and state and local health officials are collaborating to ward off a serious outbreak. "We're really trying to stay ahead of this," said Barnard, the Communicable Disease Surveillance Coordinator for DPHHS.

This year, cases have been reported in Cascade, Flathead, Lake, Missoula, Ravalli, and Yellowstone Counties. The county with the most cases is Lake County with 16, followed by Flathead with six cases.

Brigid O'Connor of the Lake County Health Department has been working closely with healthcare providers in Lake County over the last few of weeks to identify cases early and make sure that contacts receive the appropriate prophylactic treatment.

Cooperation among clinicians in the affected areas has helped the situation immensely, Barnard said. "Timely reporting of cases and thorough identification of contacts of the cases is essential to successful public health disease control," she added.

Barnard offers these simple suggestions to help diminish the spread of pertussis:

- Anyone who has a cough for more than 14 days with post-cough vomiting or a 'whoop' noise should be evaluated by a health care provider for pertussis.
- Early recognition of the signs and symptoms of pertussis is important. (see below)
- And, recognize if you've been in close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with pertussis, seek preventive antibiotics from a healthcare provider.
- Keep up-to-date on vaccinations.

Also, keep in mind 15-20 percent of people who have been vaccinated are still not immune. And, Barnard said there is a misconception that people who have been vaccinated but still get pertussis are not contagious. “That simply isn’t true,” she said.

Pertussis can be a very serious disease, particularly for infants less than one year of age. Since it is quite contagious, the disease can easily spread through the air from a sick person during talking, sneezing or coughing.

The illness starts with symptoms similar to a common cold. People suffering from whooping cough often develop coughing fits, especially at night, which may give a high-pitched ‘whoop’ sound. The ‘whoop’ is a sign that the person is struggling to breathe between coughs. The disease can be very severe and, although deaths are rare, they do occur, especially in infants less than one year of age.

For more information call Barnard at 406-444-0273.